On Wells—Early, Mediaeval and Modern

A London Letter From

Hugh Walpole

in America.

NEXT in succession to the unclassified talent of Kipling and Moore come three men who have many things in common. H. G. Wells, Arnold Bennett and Galsworthy are nearly of the same age, began to publish novels within a year or two of one another, and, if it is not too strong to say that they have already given us their best work, have all definitely shown us by this time what are the boundaries and limitations of their talent.

They may also be said to have arrived in the fullest sense of the word; namely, that no later critic of the English literature of the first twenty years of the twentieth century will be able to disregard any of them. By far the biggest of the three in the eyes of his own generation is H. G. Wells. There is probably no man alive writing English to-day who is so seriously considered in so many various circles of men and women throughout the English speaking world. If he is not quite a household word in the sense that Kipling is he arouses many wider interests and curiosities than does that buccaneering captain. It is impossible for the ordinary man in the street to escape Wells. He is to be seen by everybody daily performing his mental athletics, very lightly clothed and breathing heavily on the lawn outside his house. Before he has had his breakfast he has informed the whole world how he is feeling this morning. He says his prayers in the village street, eats his ham and eggs on the top of the village stile and walks on to the village common to tie his tie.

The British man-in-the-street would in nine cases out of ten abuse and chastise this publicity. He has tried on several occasions to abuse Wells, but the vitality of the man, his truly absorbing interest in the movement of the world, his amazing flood of brilliant extempore, the poet in him, the superficial and rather easy philosopher in him—these things have won the man-in-the-street to declare, "Well, there'll never be another like him. Let us enjoy him while we may."

About Wells the novelist the situation is not quite so clear. He himself has declared that the novel is anything you like to make it; that it includes everything and that everything includes it; but his inability to create character and, indeed, his strangely slack interest in the individual have hampered him most seriously in this field. He can draw admirable pictures of himself at different stages in his career. If we take *The Wheels of Chance*, the first half of *Kipps, Love and Mr. Lewisham, Tono-Bungay* and *The New Macchiavelli* in that order, we have a pretty accurate autobiography. I do not mean, of course, that Wells's uncle ever invented a patent medicine or that he himself ever attempted official politics, but these books show his mental attitudes to the world in an amazingly frank and invigorating series of pictures.

It is as the creator of pictures rather than people that Wells is a true master. Those novels of his that have forbidden him to draw pictures have been quite incredibly bad. If there is a worse novel in modern English literature by a serious man of letters than *The Soul of a Bishop* I'd like to hear of it; and *The Wife of Sir Isaac Harmon* and *The Passionate Friends* are nearly as poor. One novel only is, I think, an exception to this rule, the perfectly delightful *Marriage*, and there, strangely enough, it is only when he begins to draw pictures in the rather absurd Labrador finale that he loses conviction.

H. L. Mencken in that very clever article of his, *The Late Mr. Wells*, makes, I think, a mistake natural to his temperament when he dismisses the early imaginative stories as a long row of extravagant romances in the manner of Jules Verne. I suspect that he has never read them, and has been betrayed into the same sort of blunder that led him the other day to speak of Couperus's *Ecstasy* as though it were the first of that great artist's work to be translated into American, disregarding entirely the magnificent *Small Souls* series. If Mr. Mencken will read *The Wonderful Visit, The Time Machine, The Invisible Man* and *The First Men in the Moon* I think that he will at once admit that they are very far, indeed, from being "extravagant Jules Verne romances."

These books offer a series of amazingly beautiful poetic pictures. Think for an instant of the last ten pages of *The Time Machine;* of the arrival of the angel in *The Wonderful Visit;* of the arrival in the moon and the first sunrise. Here is a freshness, a color, a sense of pathos and justice and truth, a burning imagination that the world will never, I think, let die. I emphasize these earlier books especially because Wells has gone so far since those days that it has become a tradition with some people to dismiss that early work as negligible.

Even in the more avowed "Jules Verne" romances books like *The War of the Worlds, When the Sleeper Wakes, The War in the Air, The Food of the Gods* that same poetic imagination is magnificently displayed. Had Wells died in 1900 the world would still have been secure of a poet and an artist of the first rank.

The novels of his middle period, the period before he became so deliberately propagandist, will remain, I think, as his chief claim to immortality. These books are only five in number—*Kipps, Tono-Bungay, The New Macchiavelli, Marriage* and *The Passionate Friends. Love and Mr. Lewisham* stands outside this period, and *Mr. Polly*, perhaps the most immortal of them all, is a unique work in literature refusing to be classified. These five books are not, as I have already said, great psychologically; they are certainly not great in the quality of style, of method, of construction, of any of the Flaubert essentials.

They do present, as do no other books of our time, a chronicle of the intellectual, physical, material life of England during the years between the South African war and the war of 1914. The spiritual life is not represented, the keener philosophical life is not represented, and the truth about the upper aristocratic life is not represented; but the average life of the average thinking, wage earning, discontented, muddled man of the time is marvellously true.

He is all there—his loves, his food, his ambitions, his rebellions, his exercise, his inventions, his snobberies, his cowardices, his courage and his humor. Wells, having been close to him once, having risen out of him into a freer air, looks back upon him with no great love for him, indeed, but with a passionate desire that he should improve his conditions.

It is this passionate longing for a less muddled world that has reduced the Wells of the most recent period, the Wells who has "sold his soul for a pot of message," as some one put it the other day. The war only increased and stimulated the propagandist energy that had always been there.

I find it difficult to speak fairly of these recent books; I regret so deeply the earlier Wells. I cannot penetrate the heavy, thick atmosphere, compounded of curses and supplications, of potions and recipes, of sermons and tenth rate philosophies of *The Soul of a Bishop, God the Invisible King*, and, worst of all, that ponderous lump of inconsistencies *Joan and Peter. The Undying Fire* is another matter. It has in it two superb passages: the early pages about the animals, the later ones about the German U-boats. Here Wells's old poetic imaginative gift is back in full force.

Of his future, what can one say? He has written enough to stake his claim. So impulsive and versatile is he that no one can prophesy as to his next direction. He is now engaged upon the *History of the World*, and the only thing that one can say with safety is that it will be surely Wells's world and not God's.

His influence is already tremendous and not entirely for good. Many writers have lost something of their individuality through reading him. The younger men, if they do not worship him quite as they did, cannot escape from his rotund energetic shadow. But his vitality, his poetry, his humor—these have been great gifts to the English novel. We are proud to have him.

HUGH WALPOLE.

Grown Up, and Getting Back at Teacher

SOMEBODY having asserted that the child is father to the man, it is but reasonable to go on and affirm that the child's education is the man's success or failure. The fact that this bromide does not work out at all in nine of ten instances has nothing to do with the case.

For the past decade we have had writer after writer, educator after educator, theorizing on the inefficiency of modern educational methods and systems in America. All admit that something is the matter, but no two agree as to what the remedy should be. This is probably because they themselves are the educators. An agreeable vision is conjured up by mediating what would happen in all of the professional educators were provided with soporifics.

Along comes Mr. Floyd Dell, who is not a professor or a professional educator at all, and proceeds to growl horrendously and shake up our educational system by the nape of its rather stiff neck—to his own and the reader's pleasure. Mr. Dell is a child who has grown up and still retains those glimmerings of common sense in regard to education that every bright child has until they are educated out of him. *Were You Ever a Child?* will not disturb most educators because they won't read it, Mr. Dell not having a few degrees' worth of letters after his name. But the book assuredly crystallizes the doubts and revolutionary opinions on this subject of many a thinking person.

Just what is the matter with our educational system? According to Mr. Dell, everything. The school building, the teacher, the books, the methods of giving the child a mouthful of education from a dozen different plates every day, the goose step idea of "equality" and turning out a consignment of educated children every semester, the appalling lack of any artistic and æsthetic values—all of these things he holds up to scorn. He shakes a wicked pen, but he shakes it in a righteous cause.

According to Mr. Dell, one prime purpose of the school is to teach the child what the world of reality is like. The child will not absorb this knowledge from learning by rote and by the hardest, "Blow, bugle, blow! Set the wild echoes flying," however good that exercise may be for the vocal cords. In the words of Mr. Dell: " . . . Since what we started out to do was to teach children what the world of reality is like, it is necessary that they should be in and of the real world. And since the real world outside is not, unfortunately, fully available for educational purposes, it is necessary to provide them with the real world on a smaller scale—a world in which they can, without danger, familiarize themselves with their environment in its essential aspects—a world which is theirs to observe, touch, handle, take apart and put back together again, play with, work with, and become master of; a world in which they have no cause to fell helpless or weak or useless or unimportant; a world from which they can go into the great world outside without any abrupt transition—a world, in short, in which they can learn to be efficient and happy human beings."

There has hardly been a better definition of the purposes of education than this paragraph since education has been written about.

Ridicule is pointed with some reason at the teacher who, under modern conditions, is forced to teach half a dozen subjects in a single day. While this is not true of the intermediate and higher branches, it certainly does apply to primary schools. Mr. Dell offers a happy analogy in the supposititious case of a man painting a picture. A bell rings as he is in the midst of a brush stroke. Immediately he drops the brush and begins to recite *How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix.* Half way through that the bell rings again; the man says: "We'll go on with that to-morrow," and commences to chisel the surface of a block of granite. Then, after a little, in a somewhat exhausted condition, he commences to play *The Rock of Ages* on a flute, interrupting it to tell you to sit up straight and refrain from whispering. There is no doubt that this is a crazy way of doing things, but it is a lifelike caricature of the way they are done in school.

Mr. Dell asserts that children do want to learn. But they want to learn from people who know. A child will stop in a blacksmith shop and learn more about the smith's labors in half an hour than he will learn in a school machine shop in a term. What the child needs is people who know, to whom he can go and find out. There are ways of teaching the child without driving him and without pouring carefully measured amounts of education into his mind. The matter poured into him is too artificial.

There is geography, for instance. To this day, Mr. Dell asserts, he thinks of Illinois as bright yellow and Indiana as pale green, for so were they colored in the book he had. He feels that if he had been called upon to draw a map of the town he lived in or even the school yard he would have henceforth been unable to see a map without feeling the realities of stream and wood and hill. The drawings would have ceased to be mere pictures. If an aviator should stop and ask him what the way to Illinois is he would be unable to answer, but if the old geography were brought to him he could point it out in the dark. Illinois is not part of the world to him. It is a bright yellow picture in a big book.

There are so many good points in Mr. Dell's book that these brief selections can but hint at its saneness. Once again he proves the saw that it is the onlooker who sees most of the game. Not being an educator, not being tied hand and foot by theories, he is able to pick to pieces the flimsy, uncertain structure we call American education.

It goes without saying that his book will do no good!

H. S. G.

WERE YOU EVER A CHILD? By FLOYD DELL. Alfred A. Knopf.

THE idea underlying Henry C. Rowland's new novel, *Duds*, which Harper & Brothers are to publish in January, is, we learn, that "an unexploded situation can be as dangerous as an unexploded shell." Explosives guaranteed to be planted in *Duds* are "an international loot-smuggling combine, a highly precious jewel, and an alluring woman." Not precisely new explosives, but always effective in skilled hands.